

RONALD MCDONALD IS STALKING YOUR KIDS¹

Emily Main[©]

San Francisco raised eyebrows last Tuesday when the city's Board of Supervisors approved a measure preventing fast-food restaurants from including toys in unhealthy meals. The measure doesn't amount to an outright ban, but henceforth, any kid's meal that comes with a toy has to meet age-appropriate limits on the calories, sodium, and fat. Not surprisingly, fast-food chains aren't happy.

That could be because those toys represent a huge portion of their marketing efforts to children. A new report by the Yale University Rudd Center for Food Policy and Obesity has revealed that a majority of fast-food advertising dollars are spent on toy promotions to get kids, along with their parents, in the door and buying their food. The report also found that those marketing efforts have been increasing since 2003, even as other food companies have been decreasing ad spending on children in response to the growing childhood-obesity epidemic. Efforts to promote healthy menu items, on the other hand, haven't increased much at all.

That puts parents—and children—in a tough spot. "One thing we learned from parents is that these restaurants serve a need they have, to feed children in a way that's convenient and is a good value," says Jennifer Harris, director of marketing initiatives at the Rudd Center. "It might be unrealistic to tell parents they should never take their kids to fast-food restaurants. It's more realistic to say that fast-food companies need to be less aggressive in the ways they market to children."

THE DETAILS: The report's authors gathered information about the nutritional quality of food and the marketing practices of the 12 fast-food chains that spent the most on marketing to children under 18, and they found some rather disturbing trends. The fast-food industry spends about \$660 million of its annual \$4.2 billion advertising budget (about 16 percent) on marketing to children and teenagers, and more than half of that is spent on toy giveaways. When looking at the nutritional value of the kid's meals that usually accompany those toys, the authors found that just 12 out of a possible 3,039 possible food combinations met the nutrition criteria for preschoolers, and just 15 met the criteria for older children.

While toys make up the largest portion of fast-food spending, TV makes up the next largest chunk, just under a third. There have been some positive changes in this arena, says Harris, with McDonald's and Burger King (the two companies that spend the most on advertising) joining the Children's Food and Beverage Advertising Initiative, an industry effort designed to encourage advertisements of only healthy foods to children. But the number of TV ads has still gone up, she says, increasing 21 percent for preschoolers, 34 percent for children between ages 2 and 11, and 39 percent for teenagers over the past decade. Harris also found that, although fast-food companies have pledged to advertise only healthy foods to children during shows where kids make up most of the audience, "over half the ads that children are seeing are adult-targeted ads seen on shows like *American Idol* and sports events where children aren't a majority of the audience."

An even more concerning trend that Harris found is the amount of money and effort being poured into online advertising. Internet ad sales still take up a fraction of overall ad spending, the report found, but McDonald's now has 13 different websites for children and teenagers.

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Eight of the 12 fast-food chains analyzed had created mobile phone apps accessible by teenagers, and nearly all the fast-food chains have pages on Facebook and other social media sites, while also advertising on children's websites like Nickelodeon.com.

All this marketing exists in a world where fast food is no healthier than it was a decade ago. The report found that teenagers often consume 800 to 1,100 calories in a single fast-food meal, and all children get more than half their daily recommended sodium intake per trip. When the report's authors visited the stores to purchase kid's meals, the healthy items offered by most of the fast-food chains were never the default choice; restaurant employees automatically served french fries or another unhealthy side item more than 84 percent of the time and a soft drink or other unhealthy beverage at least 55 percent of the time. The only exception to this was Subway, where healthy sides and drinks were offered 60 percent of the time.

WHAT IT MEANS: Despite the growing concern and awareness about the childhood obesity epidemic, kids are still suffering an onslaught of marketing of unhealthy food. But Harris still sees a few positives. For one, the only restaurants that market their foods directly to children are McDonald's, Burger King, Subway, and Dairy Queen. (Still, as she notes, kids see ads for Wendy's, Dunkin Donuts, Taco Bell, and the other chains while watching TV with their parents). And nearly all the restaurants studied were offering healthier food or side items on their menus—they just aren't being promoted. "Restaurants should make healthy the default," Harris says, adding that parents should have to ask for the fries and sodas to go with kid's meals, not the apples and milk. It would also help if restaurants started including some of the healthier alternatives on the dollar- and 99-cent menus that many fast-food restaurants like to promote. "Adolescents are more price sensitive because they have less to spend," says Harris.

To protect your kids from aggressive fast-food marketing, here are few other things you can try:

- **Limit television time.** The easiest way to avoid the temptation of unhealthy fast food is to shut off the source of the messaging. "Turning off the TV and keeping very young children from watching commercial TV as long as they can is an important thing," says Harris. "Studies have shown that when young children watch PBS or noncommercial TV, advertising doesn't affect them as much." And monitor your own viewing time. As the report showed, two-thirds of the advertising children see airs while they're watching adult programming.
- **Keep your preschoolers offline.** There's really no good reason preschoolers should be playing around on fast-food-company websites, says Harris, even though McDonald's has launched one, Ronald.com, designed exclusively for tots. It can be hard to keep teenagers off Facebook and their smartphones, but at least for younger children, limit their time online to the American Academy of Pediatrics' recommended two hours, and you'll also protect them from the increasing prevalence of online ads.
- **Get the facts.** The Rudd Center has published its full report and the nutritional information for all the 12 chain's children's meals on its website, www.fastfoodmarketing.org. There, you can find out who's offering the healthiest, and unhealthiest, kid's meals before you get to the restaurant and have to deal with demands for fries, sodas, and the toy du jour.